



Book Review

Hansen, Kristine. *A Rhetoric for the Social Sciences: A Guide to Academic and Professional Communication*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998. 492 pages.

Reviewed by Mada Petranovich Morgan, Ph.D., Southern Oregon University

One of the pleasures of WAC's acceptance in the academy is the growing number of books that explore both its theory and practice. One of the discomforts of the same phenomenon is trying to organize my bookshelves. Kristine Hansen's *A Rhetoric for the Social Sciences: A Guide to Academic and Professional Communication* exemplifies this dilemma. This rich book needs to be cross-referenced in my filing system under at least 6 categories: "Texts for Upper-Level Social Science Classes"; "Texts for Professional and Tech Writing"; "Rhetorical and Composition Theory for Teaching Assistants"; "Training Issues for Social Science TAs"; "Writing the Research Paper"; "Literacy Issues in WAC." The problem is not of recommending this text: I can do that wholeheartedly. The issue is who I would like to see reading it.

Hansen writes that the textbook is intended for "college juniors and seniors who are majoring in the traditional social sciences as well as related fields that study humans and their behavior. . ." (xv). Her purpose is to provide a comprehensive guide to writing in the social sciences; her assumptions are that the writing is related to the goals and epistemology of the discipline and that students need instruction on all phases of the knowledge making. Her belief in the rhetorical nature of writing in the social sciences opens the door to the thinking, researching, and writing that back up claims of knowledge. Hansen notes in the "Preface" that the book has taken more than 10 years to complete, and the seven parts—20 chapters in all—show how inclusive her "rhetoric" becomes.

Part I is Hansen's "bedrock," as she supplies the assumptions and definitions that her readers—either students or colleagues—need to understand. Clearly and convincingly, she integrates a view of rhetoric and

the social production of knowledge into the “public” persona of the social sciences. Throughout the discussion, she illuminates the social sciences’ stance toward knowledge, linking the questions, observations, instruments and methods, interpretations, and claims. The reader understands that the rhetoric of the social sciences is clearly more complicated than “packaging ‘objective’ truths in ‘neutral’ language” (17). Chapter 2 moves the rhetorical discussion into the specific acts of composing, and here, again, the influence of language, audience, and genre are explained through the lens of a social science discipline.

Hansen describes Chapters 3 through 8 as the “heart” of her book. For her intended audience—the juniors and seniors majoring in the social sciences—the discussion is vital. She uses “disciplined inquiry” to describe how the research methods reflect the standards and assumptions of a discipline. Descriptions of quantitative and qualitative methods (including ethical concerns), interpretive strategies, interviews, observations, surveys, and experiments warrant separate chapters. But Hansen does more than explain: each method has an example of both a professional and student document, annotated to show how the choices of the authors exemplify their discipline’s rhetoric.

Part III, “Finding and Using Existing Knowledge,” is the requisite “library” and “Internet” search techniques. The discussion is brief but informative, and the useful annotations of the student paper at the end of Chapter 9 work better than most of the examples found in several handbooks. Hansen acknowledges that the information on Internet searching changes rapidly, and her approach is general and basic.

Parts IV and V are devoted to discussions of common social science and career-related genres. These chapters could function as a handbook, with underlying assumptions and principles of the genres explained and illustrated. As with the examples throughout the book, these models—a proposal, prospectus, position paper, opinion piece, abstract, critique, book review, resume, letter, and memo—are well chosen and annotated.

“Visual and Oral Rhetoric” is the focus of Part VI, and I found this section a welcome addition. The straightforward pointers on page layout, type sizes, and headings cover the basics of the primary documents for school or work, as does the chapter on graphics. It addresses some issues—such as using consistent heading levels and choosing graphics with both efficacy and ethics in mind—that perplex many students. Chapter 18, “Oral Presentations,” squeezes “rhetoric” back into public speaking, with reminders and guidelines on presentations that combine the basics usually found in a communication studies’ public speaking course with practical tips on visual aids.

The last two chapters, listed as “Style in the Social Sciences,” address “Institutional Style” and “Documentation Styles,” the final chapter

covering the usual ground of APA and Turabian documentation. Chapter 19, on institutional style, is a curious mix of APA guidelines on how to use references to gender, racial and ethnic groups, or research participants and a general nod toward “detached persona” and “jargon.” Considering how thoroughly Hansen addresses so many issues of writing as a social scientist, I was disappointed in the scarcity of concrete examples of “writing” choices the student in the social sciences must make.

Good reasons for this too-brief discussion are probably many, and Hansen offers one in her introduction when she warns that “the social sciences do not all sanction the same style” (436). In addition, a textbook taking over 400 pages to even get to this point of writing has to set limits.

Another reason could be the paucity of concrete ways to talk about the differing writing styles in the academy. As knowledgeable as we have become on the “rhetorics” of the disciplines, we are still struggling both with the specifics of describing the sentence patterns that reflect the rhetorical choices and with helping the students become proficient at the manipulation. The usual workhorses are the active/passive verb choices and the use of agency in the subject position, usually simplified to the use of “I” or “we.” From the first-year composition course that introduces some of the disciplinary conventions to the capstone course in writing in the majors, we need to be consistent in explaining the “it depends” of writing choices. Unfortunately, those guides to consistency are few, and we are finding that in addition to the definition of “good writing” that changes as it crosses the discipline, so do many of the components that usually go into “good writing,” such as voice, stance, complexity, clarity, and evidence.

Some of the answers may be coming from the research and scholarship of more specialized fields of study. Studies from linguistics, anthropology, functional grammar, discourse analysis, and genre continue to add models and insight. Helpful analysis on specific strategies is starting to accumulate: metadiscourse, coherence, voice, clause modification, subject choices, presupposition triggers, and hedges are all promising venues for describing the writing choices that a student must make.

One book cannot cover everything in the complex arena of writing in the disciplines, just as one course cannot make an expert out of the novice. But Hansen’s *Rhetoric* comes closer than most. One of the major benefits of Hansen’s book is the challenge to other “teachers of the disciplines” to define themselves as thoroughly as she has the APA-governed social sciences. I found myself wondering if the English studies teaching assistant could identify similar rationales behind the “disciplined inquiry” in an agonistic literary criticism; I question if the physics TA has the same understanding as the more experienced professor of what makes a lab report “good writing,” when that writing had to start with assumptions

about truths and knowledge. Often these are the teachers in the lower-division classes when undergraduates are first introduced to their discipline's epistemology.

Early in her textbook, and after the explanation of the "big picture" of rhetoric, Hansen reminds the reader that "rhetoric" has also been the definition of a book that serves as a guide for using language. Her textbook becomes both: an expansive look at the hows and whys of researching and writing like a social scientist and a specific handbook for teaching the practical applications. I think I need at least six copies for my bookshelf.